

Some shadows of doubt fall across silver's shining price picture

By Roger Boye

"I FEEL LIKE I just won the state lottery," said a grinning Chicago woman as she fingered her \$875 check from a local coin dealer.

Like many other persons, she had sold a batch of old coins to cash in on the high price of silver.

"I had only \$50 worth (in face value) of dirty quarters and didn't dream they would be worth this much," she said.

Without a doubt, the rise in precious metal prices during December and January has resulted in windfall profits for many people who own certain types of coins. But not everyone is happy, especially some experienced coin collectors.

That's because millions of silver coins, including the Chicago woman's quarters, are being melted by silver smelters who sell the refined metal to industry.

"Someday, these last several weeks may be known as 'the great numismatic holocaust,'" said a longtime suburban coin buff. "Collectible dates, common dates . . . they're all going into the pot."

During December, for example, smelters in the United States recov-

ered more than 2.1 million ounces of silver from melted coins, according to the Silver Institute in Washington, D.C. That figure is equal to the silver in about 12 million silver quarters, and refined totals for January and February are expected to be much higher.

Hobby experts fret that so-called "common-date coins" (such as silver dimes and quarters minted in huge quantities during the 1950s) eventually could become "scarce dates." And as each coin is destroyed, some of the mystique of collecting dies, too.

Still others predict with sorrow that the recent record prices for precious metals — and for "rare-date coins" in general — will make coin collecting a hobby that only the wealthy will be able to afford.

"Coin collecting is becoming more popular, but it's becoming more popular in an elitist fashion," said Q. David Bowers, a respected Los Angeles coin dealer who was quoted in Numismatic News.

"I'm disheartened by the fact that the current rise in prices has not been accompanied by a grass-roots growth in interest . . . For the sake of the hobby, we can't afford to become elitist," he added.